

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON POPULATION AND P E P

By RICHARD RUMBOLD

P E P (Political and Economic Planning) has recently issued a valuable paper (*Population and the Press: The Royal Commission Reports*)* setting out its views on the Report of the Royal Commission on Population published in June, 1949. The pamphlet, as is to be expected, consists mainly of a comparison between the Royal Commission's report and P E P's own report on the same subject which was published in 1948 under the title of *Population Policy in Great Britain*.† "The two reports," says P E P, "have very much in common. They discuss the same things, in much the same way, and by and large come to the same conclusions." But (it adds) for that very reason the Royal Commission's report is rather disappointing, since a body with such resources might have been expected to achieve more than P E P with its far more limited resources although the formidable battery of statistics accumulated by the Royal Commission will prove invaluable in any further discussions of population questions; and it is very reassuring that, despite the highly controversial nature of the subject, these two very different bodies, working independently, have seen the essentials of the problem in very much the same light.

Eugenists, however, will note with disappointment that the Royal Commission, although implicitly aware of the qualitative aspects of population problems, is much more cautious than P E P in making any positive recommendations in this matter. P E P wants a Family Welfare Service linked to the National Health Service within which would be a group of para-medical services. This Welfare Service would be at the disposal of couples contemplating marriage,

giving them advice on minor sexual problems, advice which should include an eugenic assessment of the parties; abortion would be legalized on certain eugenic grounds; and voluntary sterilization would be permissible for people suffering from hereditary disease. But support for these admirable proposals is lamentably absent from the Royal Commission's report. "We have received evidence (it states) of a small but growing demand for advice on suitability from an eugenic point of view for parenthood. The evidence does not justify us in recommending any comprehensive provision at this stage, but we should like to see experiments made where circumstances are suitable. A clinic which embraced facilities for advice on infecundity and on birth control could develop naturally as the needs emerged to include pre-marital examinations and other services of direct relevance to family welfare." This all eugenists will rightly regard as "fiddling while Rome burns"; and in addition no proposals are made in regard to sterilization.

Let us turn now to the wider issues of population policy. Both reports are in agreement (though they reach it by different considerations) as to what the *goal* should be: a falling population, they declare, would have considerable disadvantages, but, on the other hand, there are no valid reasons to justify substantial increases, and the goal of policy should be, therefore, to increase the birth rate to the point at which the present population replaces itself. P E P believes that with good planning a rising standard of life can be secured for a stationary population, and the Royal Commission states that "the uncertainty of the future regarding world supplies of food and the opportunities of British export trades gives us good reason to be thankful that no further large increases in our population are probable."

* *Planning*. No. 301.

† *EUGENICS REVIEW*, July, 1948, 40, 2, pp. 55-60.

The methods of securing the desired increase in the birth-rate should be primarily by creating a society sufficiently attractive for people to want to bring children into it. There must be no attempt to coerce women into childbearing by lowering their status, depriving them of careers or by restricting the use of contraceptives. No one could quarrel with this humane thesis, but it may be questioned whether P E P is justified in contending that "individuals may be morally certain that children are a blessing and that anyone who thinks otherwise has a false and distorted sense of values." Parenthood, surely, is a vocation, calling for qualities of high selflessness and devotion, and not everybody is inclined or fitted to accept its trials and responsibilities; and nothing can quicker lead to disaster than to badger people into bringing children into the world against their will by telling them that their reluctance to become parents spells a distorted sense of values.

Both reports recommend an increase in family allowances and an increase in the present insurance maternity grant for the first baby; and P E P recommends low-interest marriage loans. But both declare that the major obstacle to parenthood and family life is shortage of houses. The need to build houses more quickly is imperative, and the Royal Commission asks for more variety in size of houses to enable families to move as they expand and then contract with the years; and both agree on the importance of giving large families the financial means to pay the rents of the large dwellings that are available. P E P, however, puts forward a positive proposal to extend rent assistance to all families, whoever are their landlords. After definition of

a standard of accommodation appropriate to a family, the family would receive a grant representing the difference between the rent which it could afford and the reasonable rent of this appropriate accommodation. The Royal Commission also accepts the need for some such scheme, but recommends that an expert committee should be appointed to examine the possibility of a general scheme of rent subsidies or rent rebates related to the size of the family.

Another question over which the two bodies are in substantial agreement is emigration. Both recognize the disadvantages of large-scale emigration from this country, particularly, of course, of young able-bodied workers, which is bound to exaggerate the present bad age-distribution. On the other hand, emigration to Commonwealth countries, particularly if it included a share of dependants, has obvious strategic advantages in lowering the density of population; and both reports believe that the matter should be discussed farther on the highest level between the Governments concerned. Regarding immigration, however, there is considerable difference of view. P E P is inclined to welcome selective European immigration to compensate for deficiencies in fertility, shortages of certain types of manpower and losses due to emigration. But the Royal Commission is pessimistic about the "capacity of a fully established society like ours to absorb immigrants of alien race and religion."

These, however, are relatively minor differences, and the wide measure of agreement reached by the two bodies should greatly increase the value and importance of each other's work.